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ABSTRACT

This document describes the British Adult Literacy and Basic Skills Unit (ALBSU) because information on the ALBSU experience might be useful to planners working to establish a similar national literacy center in the United States. (The ALBSU was formed in London in the mid-1970s to support the BBC's television-based national adult literacy campaign, largely as the conduit for disbursing government funds to local education authorities. However, it has since evolved into the central organization for coordinating and nurturing adult literacy activities of every kind throughout England and Wales.) Section headings of the document pose questions addressed to ALBSU administrators that are answered in the narrative of each section. Among the headings are such questions as: What kind of body is ALBSU? To whom is it accountable? Who sits on its board? Does ALBSU promote private sector participation? How does ALBSU operate structurally? ALBSU does a good deal of publishing; what do activities in this area consist of, and how does the program operate? Who writes the materials? How is the budget apportioned? What about theoretical research? Who does it? Is ALBSU tied in with universities for that--or for any other functions? For television, radio, and other forms of distance learning, what kind of support does ALBSU provide? (CML)

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BCEL BUSINESS COUNCIL FOR EFFECTIVE LITERACY

ADULT LITERACY: PROGRAMS · PLANNING · ISSUES — A Newsletter For The Business Community

NO. 20 JULY 1989

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THE U.K.'S NATIONAL CENTER: An Approach To Consider

Alan Wells, Director Of ALBSU, And Kenneth Baker, Secretary Of State For Education And Science, With Barbara Bush At The American Embassy, London, October 1987.

Creation of a much-needed national literacy center in the U.S., strongly urged by literacy analysts and a main recommendation of *JUMP START*, is a key provision in new legislation being considered in Congress. How effective such a center will be depends heavily on its form of governance, its structure and funding, its staffing, its agenda and operating style, and the manner in which it interacts with practitioners, researchers, and others in the literacy field–all matters needing careful consideration in the coming months.

BCEL recently called on director Alan Wells and associate director Judith Banbury of The Adult Literacy and Basic Skills Unit (ALBSU) in London. ALBSU is the U.K.'s national adult literacy center. Formed in the mid-70's to support the BBC's television-based national adult literacy campaign–largely as the conduit for disbursing government funds to local education authorities (LEAs)–ALBSU has since evolved into the central organization for coordinating and nurturing adult literacy activities of every kind throughout England and Wales. Because of the organization's long experience and track record, BCEL thought it might be useful to U.S. planners to take a closer look at ALBSU. As will be apparent from the interview presented below, what is especially striking about the model is its "bottom-up" approach, its emphasis on service and staff development, and its process for involving local practitioners in many areas of its work.

What kind of body is ALBSU? To whom is it accountable? Who sits on its board?

Our organization was set up by the Department of Education and Science in England, and its counterpart in Wales, to act as the central focus for adult literacy and basic skills work in those two countries. It is an autonomous unit, not a department of the government, though it is funded nearly 100 percent by the government. For administrative purposes, it is attached to the National Institute of Adult Continuing Education which, broadly, is a body subscribed to by the LEAs.

We are accountable to the Department of Education and Science for the money we receive, and to an independent management committee comprised of representatives from all the major areas concerned with policy and strategy in adult literacy, including representatives of the central government, the Department of Education and Science, the Wales Education Office, the National Association of Teachers in Further & Higher Education, the rural and metropolitan LEAs, the Home Office, the Manpower Training Agency, and voluntary groups.

We have a relatively small staff of 17*, which develops ALBSU's policies and strategies. This doesn't mean we always lead the field. Sometimes we do, giving it a push and a shove, but sometimes it's the other way around. Many of the things we've done have been based on what people in the field tell us about what they need, and we try to translate that into policy terms.

We also have a constituency of politicians. When the conservative government came into power in 1979, their general policy was not sympathetic to organizations like ours. Yet, our budget has gone up some 450 percent, and this year is above £2.5 million. This is exclusive of discretionary contributions by the 104 local LEAs, all of whom make their own additional literacy allocations. The Secretary of State for Education and Science, whom ALBSU is responsible for advising on literacy matters, is personally committed to this area of work. Literacy has a high profile in this government. We do lobbying and advocacy in a general sense on behalf of literacy and we've worked hard to see that politicians support us, partly by taking them to places where they can meet students.

(Cont'd. on p. 6)

***Note: ALBSU's central staff consists of nine educational personnel (the director, two assistant directors, and six field consultants) and eight administrative and clerical persons, all of whom work out of the central unit. In addition, there are about 60 full-time project staff in the field who are hired by local LEAs to work on ALBSU-funded projects.**

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BCEL EDITORIAL

by **Harold W. McGraw, Jr.**
Chairman Emeritus, McGraw-Hill, Inc.
President, BCEL

We can all be encouraged by the many advances in adult literacy in the last few years. Federal and state funding has grown significantly and continues to expand. Awareness of literacy needs is at a new high. An array of new legislation is currently under development in Congress. And, where the business community is concerned, hardly a day passes without BCEL learning of new funding and forms of involvement.

Important as all of these developments are, however, we cannot overlook the fact that we face an urgent and growing problem in meeting the basic resource needs of the literacy field. The harsh reality is that local literacy groups across the nation, especially the voluntary programs, are strained to capacity and finding it more and more difficult to keep up with the growing demand for their services. They need substantial help now, and we all have a responsibility to see that they get it.

We should also keep the national technical assistance organizations in mind–such as Laubach Literacy, Literacy Volunteers of America, and the Association of Community Based Education. These vital leadership groups provide essential services of all kinds to the local providers, and increasingly to the business community and other groups. Yet, they and their state-level affiliates are severely underfunded and face special problems in sustaining their levels of service.

Clearly, more funding from both public and private sources is required. But we also need to maintain a balance in the granting of funds currently available. Understandably, the meat-and-potato activities of the teaching and technical assistance groups often seem less exciting to many donors than special projects and campaigns of higher visibility and glamour. Both kinds of activity are needed, but as further investments in literacy are made, the business community needs to be more sensitive to this fundamental resource problem and take a more active role in addressing it. In the long run, the effectiveness of the national literacy effort depends on it. ■

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THE U.K.'S NATIONAL CENTER (Cont'd. from p. 1)

Does ALBSU promote private sector participation?

In general, industry's view is that education is a state responsibility and it does very little to sponsor literacy or any other kind of education. The major initiative we've undertaken is workplace-based. We fund an organization called "Workbase" which began in the London area, developing literacy with manual workers at London University, and then moving out to other employers. We wish to encourage employers to train their staff or potential staff, but adult employment training is in a confused situation at the present time. The government has provided the Manpower Training Agency (until recently known as the Manpower Service Commission) with £1.5 billion for such training. But, it is not yet clear what element of literacy and numeracy will come out of this new funding because it's for overall employment training, not just basic skills. Thus far no money has been allocated specifically for the literacy and numeracy components.

People argue that £1.5 billion for employment training is not a great deal of money. And what's happened is that while there has been a lot of talk about numeracy and literacy, it has been left somewhat to the initiative of those in the switch seat–the training managers who receive the grants for the training. Take a supermarket chain like Saintsbury's, for example. To some extent, how the basic skills training they deliver will be handled is left in their hands. The Manpower Service Commission issued documents and guidance notes, but they weren't forceful about how instruction should be delivered. ALBSU is bringing to bear whatever influence it can, producing handbooks and guidelines ourselves. We hope they will be used, but that's not the same as producing guidance which must be used.

In a new development this past April, the Department of Education and Science allocated £3 million for literacy work in the field over the next three years. It's a specific initiative for LEAs to establish open learning centers–that is, places with flexible open-entry, open-exit workshops where adults can come at their own convenience. Local industry links and a vocational slant are part of the concept, and employers will be able to send their employees to these centers for instruction.

How does ALBSU operate structurally?

One of ALBSU's strengths is that because we are centrally-based, we have a comprehensive policy and view of what's going on. We can all meet here and do, so that when people ask questions they can get a coherent and consistent answer. A field officer based locally in a region may have to work quite hard to get that kind of focus and may lose a national perspective. Thus, our core staff is based in London, but several are given regional responsibility. For example, the assistant directors also function as field officers and travel into the field 2–3 days a week. One of the consequences, of course, is that you must have staff willing and able to travel extensively.

The professional staff at ALBSU are mostly former practitioners, an advantage. A government literacy unit staffed with civil servants would instantly create a question of credibility. We have a network of regional training programs, and for the last ten years have sponsored in-service training programs in each region of England and Wales. They are practitioner-determined and practitioner-led. We've also sponsored a substantial number of projects developed by people working locally who want to do something and propose it to us. As long as it fits our criteria, we sponsor and support it. Field staff go to visit the projects at least three times a year, get reports on them and also hold conferences about them. It's also useful that each of us here can teach a class when we're out in the field. Having these skills and knowing the problems at that level also helps give us credibility.

We try hard to make sure the relationship is from the bottom up rather than the top down, and to govern our actions by whether adults who want to improve their basic skills will have better opportunities as a result of what we do. Of course, now and then that has to be tempered by political realities.

There's an advantage to being a small country. It's easy to get places–you get from one town to the next and hardly notice the space in between, and we don't have major problems of different languages. The education system is heavily determined–or was until recently–by the LEAs and they decide what they want to do. Our unit provides the carrot and a stick. The carrot is that we can offer people money and advice. The stick, though we don't use it very often, is that we can point up bad practice, indicate what doesn't work, and most people don't want to be pointed up that way. So it's a balance of relationships. We constantly talk about that balance at ALBSU because if its lost, so is good contact with the field and you'd end up doing only the lowest common denominator, the thing that everybody finds acceptable, usually something there's not much use in doing anyway.

ALBSU does a good deal of publishing. What do your activities in this area consist of, and how does the program operate?

We started off publishing guidebooks and handbooks for practitioners. We also publish packages of related thematic materials intended to promote discussion for use by practitioners with students. We gradually slipped into publishing a wider range of materials partly because for many publishers in this country the market is not big enough to put a lot of effort into it, and partly because we've identified a lot of gaps. One of the gaps is low-level, high-interest reading material, stuff that doesn't insult adults but is reasonably simple. Though it's a mixed blessing, we publish materials at cost and that's where the commercial publishers can't compete with us. The standard handbook on teaching literacy is 60 pence, which is ridiculously cheap, but we publish it cheap because our intended audience doesn't have much money.

We're probably going to move slightly back to publishing tutor material because we've got commercial publishers increasingly interested in working jointly with us on some of the student-oriented material, low-level readers and such. We've just published a series of low-reading-level biographies of rock stars which are very glossy short books, and commercial publishers are anxious to get the rights to them because the potential for children in schools is impressive even though they're written for adults.

ALBSU also publishes a newsletter that goes free of charge to about 40,000 people–practitioners, LEAs, politicians, libraries, everywhere you can think of, and we publish free publicity materials such as leaflets, posters, videos, literacy symbols and badges. We take the view that if it's about dissemination or publicizing provision, it's free. If it's a handbook for teaching, that tends to be charged at cost.

We've always had an up-market approach to our publishing. The materials should be visually good–color, glossy, that sort of thing. We aspire to be up there with the best rather than, as too often is the case in education, at the down end of the system.

Who writes your materials?

Much of it is written by practitioners. We've developed a policy of getting small groups of practitioners together with one staff person and a central field officer serving as group leader. There are two reasons for this approach. Few people could sit down and write a brilliant piece of material by themselves. Yet when they're part of a group, they can contribute and come out with good material. Also, it is our view of staff development that we've got to give people opportunities to learn. Ten years ago we had a list of people called "national experts." A lot of those national ex-

perts drifted out of the field and we suddenly had a gap. We had many practitioners at lower levels, but no "experts." It was clear we mustn't let that happen again. We had an obligation to be constantly developing people, and people should be developing themselves, with us giving them the opportunity to do that. Currently, we're getting some local practitioners to work here for three months to do specific projects. They take leave of their jobs during this time for staff development purposes, and then return to their jobs afterwards.

The only article in our newsletter written by central staff is on policy. The rest of the material is written by practitioners, who ordinarily don't lack skills or talent, just time and opportunity, which we provide. We try to recognize constantly that people at the local level are in some ways more expert than the experts at ALBSU. They could be in our jobs but for the circumstances. Society tends to rate on a scale that says being director of ALBSU is better than being out there in a classroom. It's not better, just different.

How is your budget apportioned?

About 12 percent goes for our publishing activities. Staff development activities are supported at about the same level. Three-fourths of this is for training programs organized by local or regional practitioners, which we monitor and evaluate. In addition, we run an annual conference, a summer school every two years, and workshops. Central services take another 17 percent of our budget. This includes staff salaries, space rental, travel, and advising and consulting services for local groups. Roughly 60 percent goes into the action projects we sponsor, which we tend to call developmental research. In this area, someone may want to explore how to deliver good services in a rural area, or to develop an open learning approach, or they may want to work with parents and children together, develop a numeracy course, work with unemployed people, or bridge people from literacy to other educational opportunities.

What about theoretical research? Who does it? Are you tied in with universities for that–or any other functions?

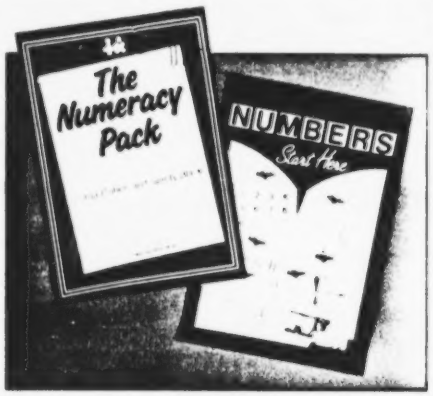
Only rarely do we work with universities. In this country they have been concerned solely with higher education and there is not one university seriously concerned with literacy. There was a time when we weren't allowed to do pure research, but then it was decided we could. Even now, though, any proposed research project is subject to approval of the Secretary of State. One recent project we did sponsor was on the background of literacy students [the longitudinal child development study, *Literacy, Numeracy, and Adults*, covered in Tools Of The Trade, BCEL Newsletter, April 1988]. Of two current projects, one is related to methods of assessment for students. The other has to do with the effectiveness of different styles of literacy provision, one-to-one versus small-group instruction.

The assessment project is being undertaken by a practitioner, someone with experience in the field, who is based at the University of Nottingham, and it's tied closely to our office here in that we guide and support it without actually doing it ourselves. The approach being taken is to look at units of progress that students can measure against themselves. It'll be based on a vision of what the student wants to achieve over the next six months, say, and we'll break that down into steps. What we're looking at is what we call at the moment a Bingo card. We'll have a grid with nothing on it, and a whole number of cards of skills and sub-skills which students can use to identify what they need to achieve to fill out the Bingo card. As the discrete goals are achieved, they'll be entered on the grid and later can be looked at to assess units of progress. The advantage of this is that you might achieve six units of progress, and I might achieve six units of progress, but they may be totally different things. I might be at the lowest level, learning to write a birthday card. You might be wanting to write an essay. Yet we both will have made a level of progress related to our own starting points and goals. So it is about progress rather than absolute competence.

As you know, we're also working with the BBC to develop a national certificate in basic skills that will be competency-based, but we're interested in measuring the progress of the student who comes along and frankly wants to learn to read and write better. There are lots of training implications in that. It has got to remain student-centered, as we don't want to teach a test where everybody does the same thing. The curriculum will be locally negotiated with the student, and we have until now not had testing in any form whatsoever.

In the beginning, people used standard reading tests developed for children, but they were rejected almost wholesale. We probably went too far in rejecting any form of assessment, and we're coming back now. Some form of assessment is needed for students to make judgments, as well as for politicians and funders. Not the old tests, but a form that is sensitive and based on the students' goals, and that involves students assessing their own progress. We should have done that earlier. Our sense is that if we don't get this right, there will be pressure from government to do all sorts of standardized testing.

In the area of action research, as contrasted to the theoretical, we've been very active. Over the years we've carried out about 150 projects of this sort which have tried on-the-ground ways of doing things at local levels. In this area, we decided we wanted the research to be done by practitioners released from their jobs for one or two years. We've told the universities we have the research workers and invited them to provide support for these people. They weren't happy about this role at first but they've gone along with it because they are paid well. ALBSU's management committee had some doubts about this in the beginning, tending to favor a more academic approach. But you have to look at research as both product and process–and it's important that people in literacy have some control over the end result. Of course, producing books and doing training programs and research all with practi-



tioners may not be as cost effective in the long term as sending in experts to do it. Philosophically, though, it's the only way to do it because people have to have opportunities to grow. People in literacy here, and it's probably the same in the States, don't get much opportunity for career development. They can't go very far on their own, so you've got to provide opportunities for growth or they won't stay in the field. "Expert" researchers too often do what they want to do instead of what practitioners and programs need.

For television, radio, and other forms of distance learning, what kind of support does ALBSU provide?

Initially, back in 1975, the BBC was probably the single key to getting literacy in the U.K. off the ground. They put a tremendous amount of resources into it. They've not done much since about 1978, but they're coming now in October with a spelling series in prime time. ALBSU will pay for the toll-free phone referral service to operate in conjunction with the television programs, and we've organized people in the field so that in every LEA there will be people to receive referrals. We've also produced and paid for a 12-page leaflet on how to improve your spelling at home, which every viewer who rings up will get free, and we've produced for practitioners a pack of spelling materials.

In addition to the spelling series, the BBC will also launch in the fall a major new program in which television will be used for heavy direct instruction of a range of basic skills. It'll be built around the national certificate program. ALBSU will be working closely with them to provide professional back-up in terms of materials and help.

(Cont'd. on p. 8)

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Of course, we currently have a great advantage in that the U.K. has only four channels. The vast majority of people watch only two of them, the BBC and ITV. But the BBC is a national channel where everybody sees the same program at the same time, with some very rare exceptions. So these new BBC programs will be available to every home, and will get big audiences.

The big unknown is that television in the U.K. is being deregulated. In the future, market forces will provide many more channels and a lot of satellite broadcasting (we have hardly any cable). Deregulation will take education off prime time television, and there will no longer be an obligation to produce educational television at all, except in relation to school broadcasting. Sunday evening at 6:10 has always been a good prime time educational program slot for the BBC. But if somebody else comes up with a good soap opera for that time slot under deregulation, they may get the audience. Educational television will have to produce big audiences to compete.

In working with television, what have you learned about the wrap-around needs at local levels?

We've learned that you need a long lead-in time, that people need a lot of advance warning to get the situation set up. They need to be consulted and to feel it's not being imposed on them by somebody else. They need advice on the kinds of responses they may make, and on such things as running Saturday workshops or spelling programs for businesses. They need copies of everything that people are going to receive. They need to feel they've got some ownership, and they need the opportunity to evaluate it afterwards, to give some feedback. They also need the ability to video the programs so they can re-use them at their own places and schedules. And they need advice on how to use the programs in their teaching. Simple things like that.

Do you have any general words of advice for those thinking about a national literacy center in the U.S.?

You can only take back what is useful in the context of the U.S. The important thing is to know where you're going, to have a clear vision of your goals. Our ongoing goal is to keep literacy an issue and to establish adult basic education as a right, much as the right of some to go to university. Adult basic education has to be for everyone, like the health service. In the U.K. we're producing a workforce that is alienated from education and training. These people get a raw deal. ALBSU's goal is to bring adult basic education much more into center stage, making it a fundamental right, not a fringe activity or crumbs that fall off someone else's loaf.

[Note: The U.K.'s Education Reform Act of 1988–described by ALBSU as the most important educational legislation since 1944–is expected in time to bring some changes in the way ALBSU operates. Though the Act focuses primarily on the organization and curriculum of schools–where a core curriculum has been laid down by central government–some of the provisions will affect the workings of the country's adult basic skills system, putting greater emphasis on planning and coordination, a move welcomed by ALBSU. But the manner in which ALBSU will interact with provider groups–such as voluntary and community organizations, social and training agencies, adult education centers, colleges, and LEAs–is presently unclear. Morever, schools and colleges, in the past heavily controlled by the LEAs, will now be able to operate independently of them and receive funding directly from the central government and the Secretary of State. In any case, literacy will continue to have a high profile in the U.K. and ALBSU will retain its key role as the U.K.'s national literacy center.]

(For more information, write to Alan Wells, Director, Adult Literacy & Basic Skills Unit, Kingsbourne House, 229/231 High Holborn, London WCIV 7DA, or phone 01 405-4017.) ■